



## Parallel UN?

WHILE the ‘Board of Peace’ dreamt up by US President Donald Trump last year was supposed to address the violence in Gaza, now, as the body takes form, it is mutating into something much bigger. In effect, if media reports are correct, the board is shaping up to be a competitor to the UN, with Mr Trump in the driving seat, seeking to remake the international order as per his vision. Multiple media outlets have published details of what the board seeks to do, while Mr Trump has invited leaders from across the world, including Pakistan, to join this new endeavour.

Even though the UN was and is dominated by the so-called great powers that wield a veto in the Security Council, it appears that in the Board of Peace, Donald Trump’s word will be law. The American leader is slated to hold “indefinite chairmanship” of the body, while he will also possess veto power. Furthermore, those states willing to cough up \$1bn will be offered a permanent seat at the table; less moneyed states will have three-year terms that can be renewed if Mr Trump — as board chairman — deems it fit. Moving beyond the Gaza genocide, the board may also seek to address other global conflicts. Moreover, the Trumpian board’s charter reportedly says that a “more nimble and effective” body is required for global peace, one that has the “courage to depart from ... institutions that have too often failed”. This strengthens fears that the board seeks to displace the UN as the world’s primary peacemaking body.

There is much that needs to be fixed in the UN system, as the world body has failed to act at critical junctures, most recently, for example, in the Gaza slaughter. But is the solution reform, or a Trumpian board? The answer seems clear. Mr Trump’s warmongering against Venezuela and Iran, and his threat to invade Greenland, are ample evidence of his lack of peacemaking abilities. If anything, in his second term he has embraced a muscular, militaristic US foreign policy that seeks to bully and cow into submission less powerful states, relying on gunboat diplomacy rather than genuine efforts to resolve disputes peacefully. The Foreign Office has confirmed that the prime minister has received Mr Trump’s invitation to join the board. However, considering the dubious antecedents of this board, and its questionable motives, Pakistan should consider politely declining. Instead, what is needed is true and meaningful reform at the UN, in order to make it a more democratic body that represents voices of the Global South. Seemingly neocolonial vanity projects such as the Board of Peace, designed to project Mr Trump’s grand foreign policy visions, are highly unlikely to bring peace to the world.

## Predictable tragedy

OVER 20 people have died after a fire tore through Gul Plaza on Karachi’s M.A. Jinnah Road on Saturday night. This tragedy did not come out of nowhere. It grew out of years of regulatory neglect and inaction. And now, compensation announcements and inquiry committees will do little to address the failures that turned a commercial building into a death trap. Gul Plaza was an ageing, densely packed structure with more than 1,000 shops squeezed into narrow corridors, basements and upper floors. Like many older markets in Karachi, it reportedly lacked adequate emergency exits, fire alarms and ventilation. Combustible materials, substandard wiring and overcrowding formed the perfect recipe for disaster. That such a building continued to operate in the heart of the city points to a system where safety rules exist largely on paper. The official response has been troubling. Firefighting efforts were hampered by water shortage, access problems and crowd mismanagement. Residents and traders insist that a faster, better-resourced response could have saved lives in the crucial first hours. With a fire station only minutes away, these claims cannot be dismissed. When flames reignite days later and bodies are recovered in fragments, the cost of delay becomes clear.

The Sindh government has announced Rs10m in compensation for each victim’s family and promised inquiries, forensic reports and traders’ rehabilitation. These steps matter, but they follow a familiar script. Similar assurances after past market fires led to little change. Inquiries rarely result in prosecutions, and rebuilding often ignores the flaws that caused the disaster. The central question is not what sparked the fire, but why such a building was allowed to operate for decades without corrective action. Regulators tasked with enforcing building and fire codes have been weakened by political interference, leadership changes and tolerance of illegal alterations. Karachi has seen this before: factories without exits, markets without safety plans, high-rises without oversight. Each time, lives are lost, grief is expressed and compensation paid. If the Gul Plaza tragedy is to mean anything, it must trigger more than condolences and cheques. It demands strict enforcement of safety codes, accountability beyond junior officials, and sustained investment in emergency services. Without that, this will not be the last fire to show how governance failures can be as deadly as the flames.

## Gated city

IT appears that the people of this region have long been familiar with the idea of gated communities. Fresh excavations at Mohenjo Daro have uncovered evidence suggesting that the ancient city may once have been enclosed by a fortification wall. According to Dr Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, a globally renowned archaeologist overseeing the project, the city had main gates where those entering were taxed. If confirmed, the finding could significantly reshape prevailing understandings of how one of the world’s earliest cities was organised, governed and sustained. With the winter season offering more favourable conditions, excavation work has resumed in selected areas of the Indus Valley site to deepen knowledge of Mohenjo Daro’s urban planning and infrastructure. The team has indicated particular interest in documenting the city’s fortifications and sophisticated drainage systems, with plans to recreate these features through models to help visitors better appreciate the scale and complexity of the civilisation that once thrived there.

These developments should excite those invested in the history of this region and the civilisations it has produced. The project is expected to span a decade and may involve university students as part of a training initiative. This presents a rare opportunity not only to advance scholarship but also to build local capacity in a field that has long suffered from neglect. Pakistan’s archaeological heritage is among the richest in the world, yet sustained investment in its study, preservation and interpretation has remained uneven at best. It matters all the more at a time when younger generations, exposed to the relentless pull of globalised culture through modern technologies, risk losing meaningful links with their own past. Archaeology and history, when pursued seriously, offer more than antiquarian knowledge. They provide a framework for understanding identity, continuity and change, which is why it is crucial for us as a society to nurture more historians, archaeologists and other scholars of the past.

## OPINION



BY ARIFA NOOR

## Youth engagement

What if after yet another amendment, it turns out it wasn’t enough to increase the age to 25?

IN times long past, kings and powerful men used messengers to communicate. Those of us brought up on *Dastaan-i-Ameer Hamza* and *Tilism-i-Hoshiruba* imagined lone men on horseback rushing between cities and fiefdoms, carrying letters or messages to and fro. They were known as *ailchis*.

In this age of modern communications, when we can even chat the Jetsons way with a video call, one would have assumed we no longer need *ailchis*. But we still do. They are no longer needed for the mighty and powerful to communicate with each other as such — though the ‘stories’ about the various London plans suggest otherwise — but they are still used, town-crier style, to talk to the *awaam*, or masses, as we like to call them in English-language newspapers. The more politically correct term would be ‘citizens’, but why bother to be PC when the *awaam* in Pakistan barely have any rights, which is perhaps what defines a citizen?

To return to the point, the powerful still need to pass on messages to those who are mere mortals. It can be a warning, a threat, a message or even a bid to test the waters. And this can be done via anonymous accounts on social media or through individuals known to enjoy the confidence of the powerful. In recent days, a few such well-connected people have been informing their listeners that those who have their ears are considering changing the voting age from 18 to 25. The reason being given is that if one can’t be elected to parliament before the age of 25, then those who make this election possible should also be of that age.

It was also pointed out, with considerable pain, that this was simply a proposal under consideration and no final decision had been taken. And this, in our hack world, ladies and gentlemen, is called a feeler — to use a news story to gauge the reaction. Test the waters, so to speak.

Why in the world, in the middle of crises such

as convincing the IMF to ease fiscal restrictions, decisions about Gaza, a security crisis, and even rolling back the NFC, would the government take on another constitutional amendment? Especially if they still have not been able to create a consensus on the NFC and the provinces-versus-local-government debate? But then, these are useless questions — for who knows how the minds of the powerful work?

But it is an idea being taken seriously on talk shows. Analysts have discussed it and politicians have been asked about it. And a senior politico, when asked about it, did point out that Gen Z doesn’t even read manifestos before voting. Valid argument, because every 30- and 50-year-old is making voting decisions after a detailed comparison of the manifestos.

Dare one say, though, that the argument about manifestos or the uniformity between voting and eligibility age is all just red herrings? Justifications conjured up post-decision making are akin to being told that the 26th Amendment had to be brought in to ensure judges could be recruited from a wider cross-section of society than just a law firm or two in Lahore. Because two dynastic families prioritise fresh blood — even if it is only in the judiciary.

What might just remain unsaid — like other issues such as trees or conflicts to the west — is that the increase in the voting age will be aimed at the PTI’s support base. This stubborn Gen Z, which the state now associates with the party, has to be kept from voting for its preferred party, hopefully reducing the PTI’s chances.

But why would the powerful do this? For it would be yet another admission of failure. Why admit that the trips to universities and colleges, which began all the way back with the caretaker prime minister, all the laptop schemes and the grand events where students weep and credit the government for their success, have not worked?

All those talk shows with students and the discussion about Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari and Maryam Nawaz being an inspiration for young people — will these conversations be discarded?

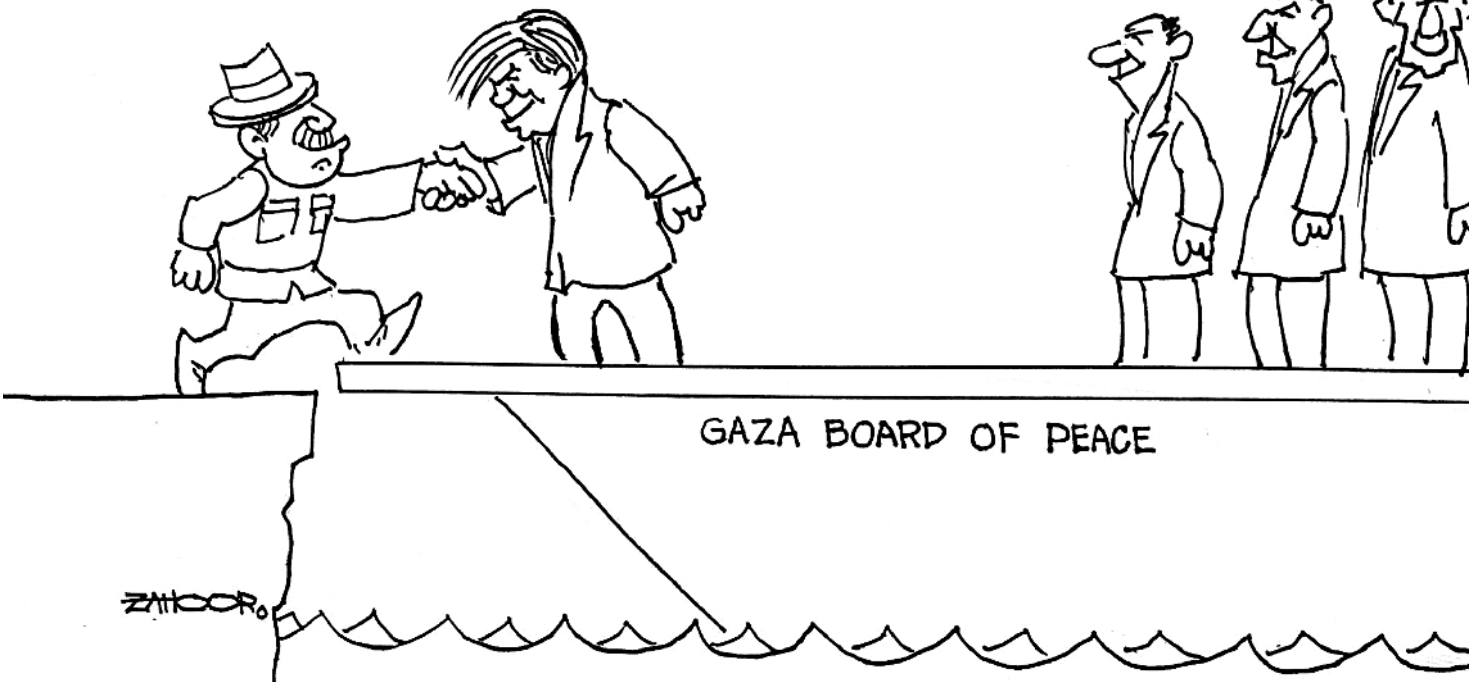
And will we be denied further conjecture on what happened when officials who can’t be named go to a university or college to ‘talk’ to future generations? And it might just mean that new, young leaders such as a television anchor and a former musician would give up their efforts to carve out a political career. Surely, this would be most unfair. This would deny far too much enjoyment to us mortals.

And what if after yet another amendment, it turns out it wasn’t enough to increase the age to 25? The 25-to-35 age group also outnumbers the 50-year-old group and is impervious to the old-world charms of the 1990s leadership. Will there be another amendment? It might just prove exhausting for the 70-year-old parliamentarians who will have to vote again.

Surely, it would be easier to simply hone the election management technique introduced before, during and after the 2024 elections. It has proved rather successful so far, and the judiciary, which tried to tinker with the results, has also been brought to heel. Why try and fix what is already working?

In fact, it is also important to point out that when there is a way to simply discard the votes of younger people, why bother disenfranchising them altogether? The latter might upset them more than they already are. Indeed, it would be better to insist that the current strategy is working and not admit to failure. Stick to the visits and the engagements, grooming new political leaders. Continue to win over the young, one weeping student at a time. And even if it doesn’t, the Election Commission is always there.

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BY JAWED NAQVI

## Rahul and Gandhi’s talisman

MAHATMA Gandhi scribbled a short piece of advice in 1948 about ethical decision-making for those in public service. “Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to *swaraj* [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self will melt away.”

A young journalist put out a video clip last week that should have impressed Gandhiji. Some of the poorest men, women and children have been sleeping in the freezing Delhi winter, covered only with plastic sheets and gunny bags, outside AIIMS, India’s premier hospital. The people include very ill or old patients who have travelled for treatment from Bihar and Uttar. It’s not that there is no night shelter outside the hospital, but it still leaves around 100 miserable people in the cold while they await their turn to see the doctor or be called for a procedure that could take days or even weeks to begin.

Reports from abroad are equally dismaying. India has never been humiliated like this. Donald Trump is misbehaving with everyone. Everyone is standing up to him, even Europe, but not India. All BRICS countries censured Trump for the military assault on Venezuela and the kidnapping of its president. Brazil is wary of the US because its president has been in prison at America’s behest. Yet it condemned Trump’s assault on neighbouring Venezuela. South Africa and Russia expressed outrage, and China’s response was priceless. Expressing grave concern over the forcible abduction of Nicol’s Maduro and his wife, China said: “Release them at once, stop toppling the government of Venezuela, and resolve issues through dialogue and negotiation.” And how did Vishwaguru, who plays host to the BRICS summit this year, respond?

“Recent developments in Venezuela are a matter of deep concern. We are closely monitoring the evolving situation,” the foreign minis-

try’s statement read. Not naming the US is understandable, given India’s desperate need to have a trade deal with Trump. But “recent developments”? Wasn’t the president of a sovereign country that once supplied oil to India just seized by the US military?

It’s perplexing at the very least, therefore, that the Indian opposition continues to be in disarray, despite there being every reason for it to take a lesson from Gandhi’s talisman and give a piece of its mind to the government for an abysmal show at home and abroad.

There isn’t room for excuses. The opposition has known all along that the prime minister has acquired an elixir of invincibility from the hand-picked election commission. Modi changed the rules to allow only him to decide who would be

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the election chief to govern the elections and how. Modi also closed all legal options to remedy what Rahul Gandhi described as “vote *chori*” or brazen theft of votes. Having slammed all forms of electoral malpractice and to good effect, what has the opposition done about it?

Thinking calmly and collectively should be their first action. If the elections have become a mere formality and the outcome is suspiciously one-sided, with little support coming from the supreme court, what should the people expect of the opposition under the circumstances?

The very least the fractured parties can do is to stop carping at each other publicly. And this is where it’s a curious mystery that Rahul Gandhi, who has spoken on earlier occasions of the need for a second freedom movement, hasn’t stood up, for the sake of peace among his opposition allies, to assure them that he would not be a candidate for the prime minister’s job without a complete

consensus. He could clarify that, though the Congress party historically had the widest nationwide reach, more than the BJP, it is not putting its hat in the ring for the illusory top job. Gandhi could say to himself, yes, the Congress can be influential outside the government. The communists were, as was Gandhiji. And the nation would owe a standing ovation to him and his family for helping create the conditions to unite the fractious opposition behind a common minimum programme. All this without eyeing power.

The overarching need for the Gandhis, together with the rest of the opposition, is to first get Indian democracy running again as prescribed by the constitution, and not by the wilful fiat of an autocrat. The resolution should not be about power sharing, if it can be helped, but about saving the country and restoring trust in its once fabled electoral democracy. It just so happens that India is in a double bind for the opposition to take guard. It’s being plundered relentlessly by a handful of favoured corporates on the one hand, while being fractured by communally divisive politics on the other. The opposition must display moral courage to wage a veritable two-front battle. The businesses are wary of Gandhi as he speaks of crony capitalism. Communalism grows because its financiers are the same lot.

Above all, the problem is one of extremely selfish interests that the opposition masks. Last week’s headlines were cheering Prime Minister Modi for winning another municipal election for his party, this time in Mumbai. What was left unsaid was equally important. The opposition had cut each other’s votes. Elections are due in opposition-ruled West Bengal, where the communists are rooting for Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s arrest. In Kerala, the communists have the Congress in their crosshairs. And each one of them was an enthusiastic member of the now almost-defunct INDIA alliance. Perhaps Rahul has a way of retrieving lost hope from Gandhi’s talisman. ■

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